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Humans no more: apocalypse and the post-socialist condition in *Frozen May*

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyse how post-apocalyptic fiction is used in a recent Hungarian film to describe a post-socialist condition which is defined by a nonhuman presence. As Péter Lichter's debut feature film *Fagyott május/Frozen May* (2017) is rooted both in genre and experimental cinema, the paper focuses on its dichotomic structure and its connections both with Hungarian cinema and literature. I will argue that *Frozen May* and other recent Hungarian films examining the topic of apocalypse offer a new interpretation of the condition of post-socialist Hungary. Due to its local historical-cultural references and concept of 'alternative regime change', the paper will also examine Attila Veres's debut novel *Odakint sötétebb/Darker Outside* (2017).

KEYWORDS

Hungarian cinema;
experimental cinema;
apocalypse; nonhuman
turn; post-socialism

Learn. The winter trees.

Hoarfrosted crown to root.

Immovable curtains. (...)

it is here we must learn the trees'

inexpressible deeds.

–Ágnes Nemes Nagy: *Trees*, translated by Hugh Maxton (Nemes Nagy, 1988)

Introduction

Post-apocalyptic fiction has been popular since the late 19th century (Mousoutzanis 2009, 459). One of its themes or storylines is the eco-apocalypse which has been especially popular since the millennial turn (Hammond and Breton 2016). The theoreticians of the genre agree that eco-apocalypse is not political: 'eco-apocalypse offers a sense of purpose or mission in the absence of political visions of the future; and secondly, provides a fetish for the loss of modernist political subjectivity' (Hammond and Breton 2016, 4).

This article aims to examine how political commentary can be worked into the structure of a post-apocalyptic film that applies the eco-apocalypse storyline. Analysing a recent

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Hungarian film, Péter Lichter's debut feature *Fagyott május/Frozen May* (2017), I will demonstrate that the systematic elimination of human agents from the filmic text can be perceived as a commentary to an actual historical event, the change of the political regime in Hungary.

To present how the Hungarian historical and political context is worked into the post-apocalyptic fiction of *Frozen May*, I will place the film in the context of earlier and recent Hungarian films related to the concept of apocalypse. Arguably, Lichter's film is stylistically more ambiguous than a post-apocalyptic science-fiction film that easily fits into the genre. Due to Lichter's stylistic and narrative choices, *Frozen May* may be placed on the border of narrative fiction film and experimental cinema. I will also argue that *Frozen May* fits into the current tendency of post-apocalyptic Hungarian fiction, a broader context which includes films and works of literature as well. Thus the analysis of the film will be located in the broader theoretical framework of post-apocalyptic fiction and the concept of the nonhuman turn.

The nonhuman turn has been a frequently used term in aesthetic philosophy, mainly in the context of certain tendencies of literature and cinema. The theoretical concept of the nonhuman turn decenters the human and, thus, humanity is perceived as a part of a larger structure where human and nonhuman agents co-exist (Kohn 2013; Grusin 2015; Morton, 2016). The artists' way to respond to the nonhuman turn is to construct an aesthetic space where the importance of human beings is questioned, and the dominance of humanistic interpretations is undermined (Morton 2016, 10).

In this article, I will discuss how *Frozen May* offers a vision of alternative regime change caused or certainly dominated by nonhuman entities or agents. To argue that the connection between the nonhuman turn and an allegorical political commentary is not confined exclusively to Lichter's work, I will also briefly examine Attila Veres's first novel, *Odakint sötétebb/Darker Outside* (2017). The literary context is important because, alongside with *Frozen May*, it establishes new trends in post-apocalyptic fiction in Hungary as a generational movement, driven by artists who were born before 1990, but matured after the political change. With *Frozen May* in focus, I will examine how these post-apocalyptic works define the 'new Hungary', arguing that the connections between the socialist past and the post-socialist present are important structural motifs. *Frozen May* and *Darker Outside* also share their openness towards different media: *Frozen May* may effectively function as a piece of video art, suitable to be exhibited in public galleries,¹ while *Darker Outside* frequently uses intertexts and references to films as a stylistic method to construct a more believable and thorough alternative history of post-socialist Hungary. I will point out how *Darker Outside* is connected to *Frozen May* in its political allegory and in its similar approach to the artistic perception of post-socialist Hungarian history. These works, along with a few other recent post-apocalyptic Hungarian films, present post-socialist Hungary as a post-apocalyptic site and as the world of the nonhuman, thus they appropriate the concepts of eco-apocalypse and the nonhuman turn and turn them into political allegory.

Eco-apocalypse in contemporary Hungarian fiction

Frozen May fits into a recent trend of new Hungarian post-apocalyptic films, but one can also find the roots of the film in experimental cinema, Lichter's artistic background. After outlining these contexts, I will explain some elements of the nonhuman theory which I will

use in the analysis of Lichter's film. Finally, it is also worth noting that *Frozen May* also fits in the current trend of 'post-horror' films, a context which I will briefly discuss in relation to the marketing and promotion of *Frozen May*.

Lichter's film needs to be located in the cinematic context of films about apocalypse. The popularity of apocalyptic fiction in contemporary culture might be explained by what Jacques Derrida calls the 'apocalyptic tone' of our culture: the production and contemplation of images of global catastrophe (Derrida 1984). Derrida registers this tone in multiple disciplines and art forms based on its revitalized tradition in philosophy. As Eva Horn argues, natural sciences, economics, sociology, video games and literature (see the works of Cormac McCarthy or Michel Houellebecq) share an equal interest in the explanation or depiction of global destruction (Horn 2012).

In contemporary cinema, there has been a growing popularity of post-apocalyptic films (Mousoutzanis 2009, 461). According to Phil Hammond and Hugh Ortega Breton, the more popular trend in contemporary post-apocalyptic films does not apply the religious concept of apocalypse. It rather describes the 'environmentalist version' of apocalypse, which 'involves no moment of transcendence or redemption' (Hammond and Breton 2016, 2). *Frozen May* shows a version of this non-transcendent eco-apocalypse. In the film, the non-transcendent character of the post-apocalyptic story is emphasized by the increasing role of nonhuman agents.

The images of apocalypse, or rather, the post-apocalyptic condition, are a popular sub-genre of science fiction (Mousoutzanis 2009). Early entries of this theme are *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer 1959) or *Mad Max* (George Miller 1979), but its popularity increased after 2000 as evident in big-budget Hollywood movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich 2004), *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence 2007), *The Road* (John Hillcoat 2009) or *2012* (Roland Emmerich 2009), and also in the oeuvre of European auteurs, such as Lars von Trier (*Melancholia* 2011) and Béla Tarr. Tarr's last film, *A torinói ló/The Turin Horse* (2011) is the story of the gradual destruction of the world, up until the point where even light is taken away from the last survivors.

Arguably, the topic is also present in Hungarian cinema, although it is not nearly as popular as it is in Hollywood science fiction. In recent years, not only Béla Tarr, but also other directors of Hungarian art-house cinema revitalized the post-apocalyptic theme. In Roland Vranik's *Adás/Transmission* (2009) television stops working in a block building, stirring the lives of the inhabitants, and foreshadowing destruction on a global scale. In two of György Pálfi's films, *Taxidermia* (2006) and *Szabadesés/Free Fall* (2014), post-human bodies bring an end of the world as we know it. In Gyula Nemes's *Zero* (2016) an individual's escape from society goes hand in hand with the revolt of animals. Among these films, especially *Transmission* and *Zero* are similar to Lichter's film in terms of their political commentary which I will be discussing in more detail later on. However, these films are not part of the nonhuman turn but share the post-apocalyptic settings and bleak tone of Lichter's film.

Frozen May also fits in the contemporary 'post-horror' trend, a context which is frequently mentioned in the reviews of *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell 2014), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers 2015), *Personal Shopper* (Olivier Assayas 2016) or *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery 2017). The post-horror label is so far not more than a journalistic concept to put some independent or art-house horror films into one branch (Rose 2017). Preceded by modernist horrors such as *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski 1965), *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas

Roeg 1973) or *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980), these post-horror films promise classic horror tropes in trailers and on the posters, but in the end focus more on the mental deterioration of the protagonists, creating a conflict between marketing and product. *Frozen May* was also promoted as a 'new avant-garde Hungarian horror' (Lakner 2017), a 'horror you have never seen before' (Varga 2017) or the 'Hungarian forest horror' (Kovács 2017).

However, *Frozen May* is not to be located between mainstream horror and art-house post-horror, but rather between narrative and experimental cinema. The tradition Lichter follows in *Frozen May* is rooted not only in the post-apocalyptic genre and in the post-horror trend, but also in the works of his scarce predecessors in Hungarian experimental film, such as János Tóth's short film *Aréna* (1969), in which humanity is overshadowed and subsequently eradicated by the silent but destructive nature. *Frozen May* also follows the tradition of classic experimental films like the structuralist works by Michael Snow or Peter Kubelka, which completely dismiss human presence. Lichter's film is even closer to the works of another experimental filmmaker, James Benning. His slow cinema, especially *13 Lakes* and *Ten Skies* (both from 2004), achieves its meditative power by disregarding traditional expectations of the viewer that the images of skies or lakes should 'mean' something, that landscapes are inherently 'constructed' to please or inspire humans. The weakening or partial denial of the humanistic interpretation is also Lichter's artistic strategy in *Frozen May*.

The context of experimental cinema is also important because Péter Lichter established his name as an experimental filmmaker. He has been directing short films since 2004, often working with found footage and manipulated film negative. Both artistic strategies might contribute to weaken the significance of the human agent on film. Manipulated or abstract film eradicates human presence by rendering faces and bodies unrecognizable, a strategy Lichter followed in his second feature *The Rub* (2018), co-directed by Bori Máté. In found footage cinema, the people on screen are merely repetitions, copies of characters from other films, torn out of their original and defining contexts, becoming 'ghosts' in the new images. Lichter often plays with this possibility of found footage film, as in *Rimbaud* (2014), a short film about the French poet's travels, without any character representing Rimbaud or any archival footage of his image or voice.

To demonstrate how the humanistic worldview is weakened in Lichter's film, I will apply the concept of the nonhuman turn in the following analysis. The nonhuman turn, as Richard Grusin explains, is generally 'engaged in decentering the human in favour of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies' (Grusin 2015, vii). As a wide-ranging concept, it refers to different geological, scientific, social and artistic processes and approaches emerging in the late 20th century. It is not a homogeneous concept, rather a framework to examine people and humanity as a small part of a larger environment. The nonhuman turn might revitalize certain genres such as the post-apocalyptic science fiction and other genres which tell stories about the co-existence of humans and nonhuman entities. In return, as Eduardo Kohn argues, artistic works about this co-existence are inspired by different fields of science, particularly geology, which might be perceived as a nonhuman discipline (Kohn 2013).

The authors of the essays collected in *The Nonhuman Turn* (Grusin 2015) and Eduardo Kohn, the author of *How Forests Think* share Bruno Latour's notion that humans are (or in the near future will be) no more the dominant agents on Earth, and instead nature is constantly growing as an independent agent (Latour 2014). In this case we, as humans, should better learn 'how forests think' to survive. I quote here the title of Kohn's book about the

perspectives of a nonhuman anthropology (Kohn 2013), an anthropology promised by the nonhuman turn.² Although Kohn's methodology and inquiry are essentially rooted in anthropology, he also briefly mentions the artistic possibilities to capture the passive experience of humans as 'dumb objects' on the one hand, and the more challenging task to stylize and fictionalize the 'non-human experience' and artistically explore 'how forests think' (Kohn 2013, 6–7).

In contemporary Hungarian fiction, Lichter is not alone in his experiment to describe nonhuman entities in post-apocalyptic fiction. In recent years contemporary Hungarian literature also found ways to articulate a post-human or nonhuman position. Post-humanity is of course not the same as nonhuman aesthetics, but these are overlapping theories or frameworks which both argue against human exceptionalism, nonhuman theory being the wider concept which might include post-human works. The biggest difference is that non-human theory is not teleological, it does not see the transformation of humans into post-human beings as a progress (Grusin 2015, ix). According to nonhuman theory, human and nonhuman life forms have existed together since the human evolution.

Post-human theory is a concept with which contemporary Hungarian writers are more familiar with and use it, according to Márió Z. Nemes's analysis, to produce new identity constructions. Nemes outlines new strategies in contemporary Hungarian poetry which he calls 'new subjectivity' and 'new confessions'. He argues that these poetic strategies do not follow the 'areferential' literature of the postmodern, which decomposed or erased the traces of a speaker in the texts (Nemes 2017). New tendencies of Hungarian poetry in the 2000s and 2010s show that these 'new subjects' are more fleshed out and visible as speakers than the speakers of earlier postmodern Hungarian literature. These speakers are often post-human subjects who develop new relations with nature, landscape, animals and machines, an organic relation in which nature is not submissive to the (poetic and anthropological) self—the self is described in its relation to nature. These strategies appear in the works of Bálint Harcos, Zoltán Németh, Gábor Lanczkor, Kinga Tóth or Ákos Kele Fodor. Post-human identities are less elaborate in contemporary prose, but Imre Bartók and József Havasréti have experimented on this terrain, using genre codes, particularly science fiction and horror.

Bartók's work is important here not only because he also uses the theme of global apocalypse in his *Philosophers* trilogy of novels (published between 2013 and 2015), but also because he is the co-scriptwriter of *Frozen May*. However, the literary connections of Lichter's oeuvre do not end with Bartók's contribution to the screenplay of *Frozen May*. Among the writers experimenting with the concept of post-human identities, Márió Z. Nemes and Ákos Kele Fodor also worked together with Lichter on his short film *Rimbaud* to which they provided the script of the narration (provided in subtitles). It is also worth mentioning that Lichter, Nemes, Bartók and Kele Fodor are or have been regular contributors to the film journal *Prizma*. The co-operations and shared stylistic strategies indicate that nonhuman tendencies are systematically used as poetic strategies in the works by a group of artists who also belong to the same generation, born around 1985.

Apocalypse in Frozen May

The contexts of apocalyptic fiction and experimental filmmaking help to understand how Lichter works the concepts of eco-apocalypse and the nonhuman turn into the story and visual style of *Frozen May*. I will argue that Lichter's structuring strategy is to create

dichotomies throughout the film: oppositions between man and nature, between a humanistic and a nonhumanistic narrative, and between genre and experimental cinema. This structure is against the nonhuman turn as a concept, but these oppositions are inspired by the objectification of human agents and the radical change in the perception of nonhuman entities, two notions that are fundamental in the concept of the nonhuman turn.

In *Frozen May*, Lichter constructs a post-apocalyptic world where humanity is clearly dominated by nature and other nonhuman or post-human creatures which are hard to define. The film, however, does not dismiss the human agent. Beside the non-narrative contemplation of nature, it also shows the attempts of human survival in this new and hostile environment; attempts which inevitably fail. The story takes place in '1990, after the fall'. A nameless man tries to survive in the woods after a presumed apocalypse. He does not meet any other survivors, only dangerous, monster-like creatures. He writes notes in a computer which he finds in his hideout, then eventually falls prey to unknown attackers. In the last scene of the film, we see his dead body as another survivor, a woman plunders his possessions. This is the only time we can actually see our protagonist, as most of the film—all the scenes in which the protagonist is present—is shot in POV, from the subjective viewpoint of the protagonist. In the most part of its running time, approximately one hour of the total 71 min, the images of *Frozen May* are of a forest, a vast naturalistic space which defies the established modes of human recognition such as mapping (Figure 1). The narrative withholds any information about the extent of this forest. The protagonist is never able to find his way out of the forest, he can only build a hideout inside of it. Nature dominates the human agent throughout the story, and in the end the creatures who kill the protagonist are also presented as parts of the nonhuman surroundings: they live in the woods, and we only get a glimpse of them when they creep out from behind the trees.

The story is about a survivor's attempts to escape from the unknown entities lurking in the forest. Thus a clear opposition is formed between man and nature. This is a 'war' which has already ended, and nature 'won'. The trees of *Frozen May* are part of a forest, a multitude, a victorious army. Human agents, on the other hand, have lost contact with each other, their



Figure 1. Trees of *Frozen May*.

communities are shattered—we only know for sure that there are other survivors beside our protagonist when we see the woman at the end of the film. This scene shows that after the apocalypse people live and act separately, often as enemies of each other in the battle to survive, as seen in the final scene where another survivor, a woman finds the dead body of the protagonist and takes away any food and other useful things that he had. By the end of the film human agents die, or the part that makes them human dies. The woman at the end is not much more than an animal with the sole object of survival.

This storyline also creates a dichotomy between humanistic and nonhumanistic narratives. Lichter connects the ‘humanistic narrative’, the one centered around visible and active human agents, to the past, while in the present the film shows how the ‘nonhumanistic narrative’, the narrative in which until the end there is no sight of any humans, plays out. Paradoxically, while POV shots establish the first-person viewpoint of the human agent, they also contribute to the nonhumanistic narrative because they render the human agent invisible, and rather witness the dominance of nature. The only visible sentient beings in the story, apart from the zombie-like creatures in the background and the surviving woman at the very end, are trees. Returning to Eduardo Kohn’s question about ‘what is it like to be a tree’, *Frozen May* shows that being a tree is a constant, silent physical presence. In the contemplative shots of the post-apocalyptic nature, the constant camera movement towards and into the depth of the forest suggests that the trees have secrets, they invite the protagonist to lose himself in the forest. The electronic drone-music might also function as the ‘voice’ of the trees. These are all stylistic elements to emphasize that the trees are sentient beings.

Despite the threatening effect of the trees to the protagonist, the long, contemplative shots of the forest also present the trees as pure, sensory images. This is precisely what many works of experimental cinema aim to achieve: producing a series of images without the pressure of rational humanistic interpretation. Thus a third dichotomy is created, a dichotomy of genre and experimental cinema. The context of the horror genre, which was emphasized during the promotion of the film (Lakner 2017; Varga 2017; Kovács 2017), would promise a narrative which aims to build up the sense of fear in the viewer. However, the lack of visible people (the protagonist is only visible when he is no more than a dead body) and faces in the main storyline of the film constantly blocks this mechanism of the horror genre. The scenes in which the protagonist plays an active role (for example, when he writes notes into his computer, while trying to hide from the creatures in the woods) effectively build up the tension of a horror scene, but these scenes are scarce and abruptly ended in the film. As I have noted, in the most part of the narrative we see the forest. The spectacle of the trees is discomfiting at first, but as we only barely witness its chilling effect on the protagonist, the tension of a horror film is quickly downplayed. The sight of the trees provokes contemplation rather than fear, because the nonhuman entities which actually threaten the protagonist are not clearly visible, and we never learn about their origins and purposes, beside that of killing the protagonist.

Although the protagonist is not visible in the main narrative storyline, he is present through non-physical evidences: senses (seeing and hearing), instinct (his efforts to survive as he moves from one place to another when he feels he is being hunted), creative will (his notes in the computer) and memory through flashbacks which show the protagonist as a child. Despite his bodily absence, through these signifiers of his presence *Frozen May* also offers the possibility of a humanistic, psychological interpretation. The story of survival is also the story of the psychological deterioration of the protagonist.³ This strategy is similar

to the one used by Lars von Trier in *Melancholia*, one of the most acclaimed apocalypse films (Floquet 2016), where the psychological issues and depression of the protagonist mirrors the destruction of Earth. In *Frozen May*, the narrative implies the depression and gradual mental deterioration of the protagonist by using flashback scenes. The flashbacks serve as ‘mental shelters’ to the protagonist as there are more of them as the story progresses and the protagonist has less and less chance to survive.

The flashbacks are traces of a humanistic condition, a humanistic past, which has been, or is being, overwritten by the nonhuman present – this is the aforementioned dichotomy of the humanistic and the nonhumanistic narrative. Lichter constructs the humanistic narrative by assigning the task of an archivist to the protagonist, and by inserting sequences of flashbacks to the main storyline which hint at the past of the protagonist and also function as memories of a pre-apocalyptic world. The protagonist’s habit of taking notes using a computer in his forest hideout can be interpreted as an intention to be ‘socially useful’ as a human being by witnessing and channelling apocalypse (Figure 2). This interpretation is supported by the texts he saves to the computer, which are not only diary entries, but show a broader, more literary approach to describe the world ‘after the fall’. This is the last task of the nameless man and the single one that remains from the cultural activities of the human being—soon after he hits the final ‘Save’ button, he dies. Taking notes means more than keeping a personal diary: it is rather the last attempt to making meaning of the apocalypse by translating its sensation into words. This attempt, like the protagonist himself, is doomed to fail, as the new structuring principle of the post-apocalyptic world is precisely the lack of meaning, the void of rational thought. We can come to this conclusion because the narrative never explains what brought on the apocalypse, nor who the mysterious nonhuman ‘hunters’ of the protagonist are. It is also important that the protagonist uses a computer which seems to be contemporary to the late 1980s, but is clearly an old, outdated version when seen from the audience’s present. When we see sentences intent on explaining the post-apocalyptic environment, we see them on the screen of an obsolete piece of technology. The image itself, which contains the futile interpretation of the present, is a relic of the past.



Figure 2. Computer image of the protagonist’s notes on apocalypse.

The connection between the humanistic past and old media technology is also explicit in *Frozen May* in Lichter's strategy to use real found footage of 8 mm films as flashbacks. Apart from the scene with the surviving woman at the very end, these scenes are the only ones in the film where human bodies and faces are visible, even if on blurry images. About 8 mm film is the signifier of human memory and presence, while the present tense of the story is shot on digital film. The ontological difference between celluloid and digital film might evoke Walter Benjamin's notion about auratic art opposed to non-auratic art (Benjamin 2008 [1936]). Benjamin stated that photography and film are non-auratic because they are technologically reproduced instead of crafted as individual works. Today one might say, based on Benjamin's notion but describing the current technological context of cinema, that celluloid retains an 'aura' which digital film does not have, in the sense that the celluloid image has a photo-chemical connection to the subject of the image. Although Benjamin has stated that the mechanical copying of photographic and filmic images destroys the aura of the image that paintings retain, one might say that the definitive destruction of this aura came rather with the invention of the digital image. I do not want to overemphasize a comparison between Benjamin's original notions and another interpretation of the aura concept, I would just like to point out the gap between the significations of the celluloid and the digital image in *Frozen May*. In Lichter's film, the people in the flashback scenes have the 'aura' of a time and place centered around and dominated by human agents. Their images are more than the results of individual memory work: on a more symbolic level, they also function as the cultural memory of a fallen system. Memory is often described with the metaphor of the archive, where 'we see our memories as being "of the past", and we see archives as evidence of that same past' (Millar 2006, 106). In *Frozen May*, we also see that the protagonist undertakes the task of an archivist not only by taking notes of his surroundings and trying to find a meaning of the perceived destruction, but merely by remembering: his flashbacks serve as flickering evidences of humanity. The narrative emphasizes that the protagonist's memory work is not only personal, it is broadened into the preservation of a humanistic past. This past is signified by images of children, who can be identified as the protagonist and his sister many years before.

The images of the children hint at a possible family tragedy, further strengthening the humanistic narrative of *Frozen May*, and emphasizing that the most valuable human relations have been lost in the apocalypse. This interpretation is supported by the notion that if these scenes are indeed flashbacks, then the little boy we see in these memory images is most likely to be the protagonist as a child. In this case the girl with him must be a sibling who is now lost or dead, because she is absent from the present storyline (Figure 3). This possible family relation might be seen in new light after the final scene of the film. The woman who finds the dead body of the protagonist glances through his diary—another now-obsolete tool of individual memory work—and maybe remembers or recognizes something as we see her thinking about whose dead body and diary she had found. The last images of the film are not of her but another 8 mm footage presenting the previously seen little boy one last time. But the protagonist is now dead, so these flashbacks are presumably not his memories, but those of the woman. Previously, we assumed she is another unknown survivor, but by the very end of the film, we might also think of her as the lost sister of the protagonist. The sister who started to rob the dead body of his brother before realising who he was—a final evidence of the end of a world built of the rules and ideals of humanism.

Thus *Frozen May* builds a world in which nonhuman entities are more powerful than human beings. The human-dominated world only lingers on as the memory of a protagonist

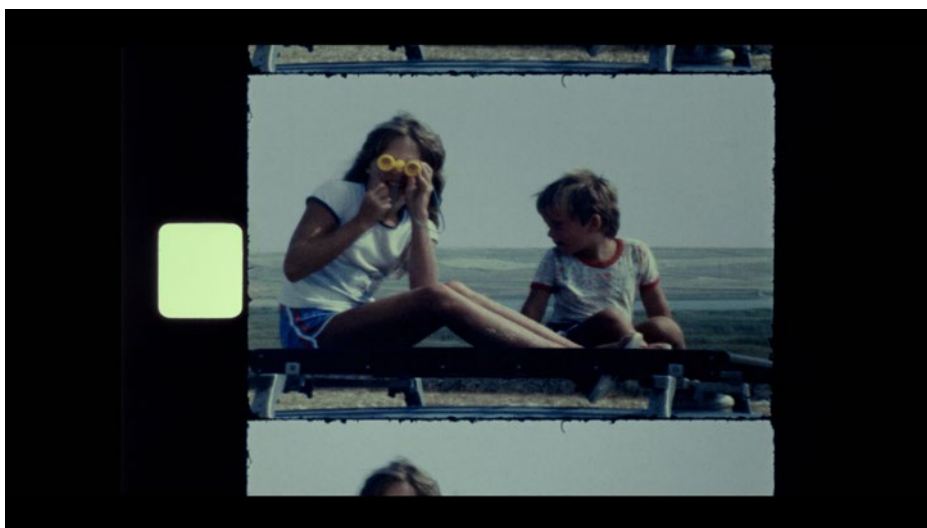


Figure 3. Super8 footage as flashback.

who is himself fading away from this new, post-apocalyptic world, as he is never seen in body. The opposition between the humanistic past and the nonhuman present is an ‘ontological difference’ mirrored by the differences between the celluloid and the digital image. The present storyline of the film promises the horror of a man hunted by nonhuman creatures, but the contemplative long takes of the forest work against the promised tension of the horror genre, moving the film closer to an experimental style. Thus the three dichotomies which structure Lichter’s film are interconnected and their balance shifts as the story unfolds: nature dominates man, nonhuman agents prevail, and the stylistic modes of experimental cinema become stronger than those of the horror film.

Post-socialist Hungary as apocalyptic site in Frozen May and Darker Outside

The author of *Darker Outside*, Attila Veres belongs to the same generation of Hungarian authors who experiment with post-apocalyptic fiction. His novel is closely connected to *Frozen May* because both works tell a story of (Hungarian) apocalypse and create the same dichotomy between the socialist past and the post-socialist present. As I will discuss in this section, both Veres’s novel and Lichter’s film regard the socialist past as a humanistic world, while the post-socialist present is defined by nonhuman or post-human entities. I will describe how apocalypse unfolds in *Darker Outside* first and then connect it to Lichter’s film. The novel shows the build-up to a Hungarian apocalypse and *Frozen May* follows in its footsteps in showing what might come after the destruction.

Veres started his writing career with horror stories written in the manner of and as an homage to H. P. Lovecraft. These stories also use the concept of post-humanism as some of them are about post-human entities (since the publication of *Darker Outside* Veres has also published a collection of his short stories in *Éjféli iskolák/Midnight Schools* [2018]). Before further analysing the post-socialist commentary of Lichter’s film, I will briefly examine Veres’s first novel, *Darker Outside*, and argue that the concept of alternative regime change in the book is in many ways similar to the post-apocalyptic condition outlined by *Frozen May*.

As in *Frozen May*, the apocalypse in Veres's *Darker Outside* probably also happens on a global scale, but it definitely starts in Hungary. The story takes place in the present day, but the novel offers an alternative history of the country. According to its timeline, strange, unknown creatures or 'animals' have arrived in a Hungarian forest in 1983, fundamentally changing the economic possibilities of the country—considering that the special milk of these animals would be the main exportable product—but also deforming the mental capabilities of the people. The change of the political regime in 1989 occurred in a new country where the cultural imagination is formed by these alien animals called 'cellofoids'. Veres emphasizes that cellofoids changed Hungarian history by inspiring everyday culture. Every chapter of the novel is introduced by mottos which are scraps and samples of this alternative history with pseudo-documentary value: real-life politicians' speeches, news, song lyrics, and other texts which are all about the cellofoids. 'I drank so much/I didn't know where I was/I told her/Embrace me with your mouth, baby/Like animals do with their tentacles'—sings the (real-life) Hungarian rock band Tankcsapda (Veres 2017, 37, all quotes from the novel are my own translation). Another 'pseudo-quote' is taken from a chapter of a non-existent book on Eastern European cinema, and relates to the films of Béla Tarr:

His films contribute to a metaphysical discourse on being and time. We do not know how his career would have progressed without the cellofoids, but the brilliant opening sequence of *Satantango*, shot on a real cellofoid farm, clearly reveals the intentions of the artist. We know something was there in front of the camera, but we cannot see it. All the while distant bells are ringing, echoing the end of the world. There are few opening scenes in film history as powerful as this 11-minute shot, where literally nothing happens, and still, everything happens. (Veres 2017, 161)

In *Darker Outside*, the cellofoids have two important qualities. First, they are confined to Hungarian areas, and their bodies decompose if they leave the borders of the county. As the story unfolds, the fear of apocalypse becomes more intense in the characters: as they plan collective mass suicide, language identities disappear, and everyone, even foreigners, speak only in Hungarian. On the other hand, these creatures channel the nonhuman experience to Hungarian people: they trigger an allergic reaction in people who come too close to them, and after the encounter these people dream of forests for years. The process of sinking deeper into the nonhuman experience culminates in the last chapters, where a nonhuman protagonist emerges next to the human protagonist, a young man who comes to work at the cellofoid farm. This nonhuman entity has a key role in the global, apocalyptic destruction, and some chapters are told from its point of view. Veres's goal is to describe contemporary Hungary as a nonhuman space, where human and nonhuman beings live together, interweaving each other's lives and thoughts. Gradually, the cellofoids slowly reconstruct human identities: first, they change the economical and political status quo in Hungary, then the cultural imagination, the subconscious, the language, the conscious and the identities of Hungarian people. As a finale, the cellofoids and the strange nonhuman protagonist completely deconstruct Hungary, and the narrative does not even shy away from bringing on the end of the world. In the end, the post-human identities that have been earlier constructed by the cellofoids shed their 'humanistic' side, and only nonhuman entities seem to survive.

Frozen May and *Darker Outside* are similar in their effort to offer an alternative history of post-socialist Hungary as a history defined by nonhuman activity. We never know who or what are the strange attackers of the protagonist of *Frozen May*, but they seem to live in

the forest and are as ruthless and indifferent to human suffering as the only nonhuman beings that can be seen in the larger part of the film, the trees of a forest. The cellofoids and a non-human entity connected to these creatures control the narrative of *Darker Outside*, transforming and destructing people and landscape as well. Both works use the theme of apocalypse to set up a world where old and known forms and gestures of humanity are lost, but new ways of human life have not developed yet, or never will. As the scene with the woman at the end of *Frozen May* shows, human survival is the only, if futile, hope in these landscapes.

Thus the film and the novel also contribute to the post-apocalyptic fiction about the eco-apocalypse, while establishing relations to an actual historical event, the change of the political regime in Hungary. They offer visions of alternative regime changes caused or certainly dominated by nonhuman entities or agents. This does not mean that *Darker Outside* and *Frozen May* are explicitly political works. Especially, in the case of *Frozen May* the experimental style seemingly rejects this interpretation, as the long takes of the forest deny any explanation of how the eco-apocalypse happened. However, Lichter, as well as Veres, still uses markers to connect their storylines to contemporary or socialist-era Hungary.⁴

The markers that connect the historical past to the fictional present are mainly the mottos at the head of the chapters in *Darker Outside* (as quoted above), but some signs of the historical background are also present in *Frozen May*. Indeed, Lichter's film builds up its political commentary based on this shift from individual memory to cultural memory, the memory of a human-dominated world. Beside the act of remembering it is also important exactly what we see in these flashback images. Although the large role of nature is already present here, as images of a sea or a lake are visible, the signs of human presence indicate that the flashbacks are strongly connected to the historical past, and are seen as images of the humanistic *ancien régime* from the post-apocalyptic present. It is as if they serve as a compass to where our protagonist comes from: possibly Eastern Europe, somewhere in the 1970s or 1980s. The context of the socialist past is evident if we look at the children's clothes in the flashbacks and connect these images to the opening, non-diegetic note at the beginning of the film: '1990, after the fall'. This note plus the flashbacks outline the pre-apocalyptic times of *Frozen May*. It is a strong symbolic gesture that the date of the story is set at the time of the Eastern European regime changes. '1990, after the fall' can mean that the story takes place after a significant political change, recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall, or a landscape after nuclear bombing. But 'fall' might also mean 'autumn'—a new era on Earth, which precedes total destruction that might be labelled as 'winter' (this play on words only comes out in English but as *Frozen May* is in English, it is available for all audiences).

Using the word 'post-socialist' in the context of Lichter's film and Veres's novel might be problematic as the institutional and political background of these works are not connected to the socialist past, and the authors come from a younger generation than those who grew up in the socialist era of Hungary. Yet, it does not change the fact that they can be seen as post-socialist subjects. The strong markers of the socialist past in both narratives invite political interpretations. In these cases, the generational identity becomes a key factor: *Frozen May* and *Darker Outside* indicate a shared artistic strategy of how the first generation who grew up after the political change reflects on the national past. Here I would emphasize also the role of the screenwriter of *Frozen May*, Imre Bartók (also a member of the same generation), whose trilogy of books summarily titled *Gondolkodók/Philosophers* (2013–2015) is also a story of apocalypse told from the perspectives of 20th century European philosophers, who lived to see the end of the world.

The experimental style of *Frozen May* might weaken its interpretation as a political allegory. However, there is a tendency in recent Hungarian apocalypse films to combine experimental film styles and apocalyptic themes with social commentary. Both Roland Vranik's *Transmission* and Gyula Nemes's *Zero* have strong political undertones. The story of *Transmission* is set in the environment of a socialist block building and offers a tableaux of the post-socialist Hungarian working and lower middle class during the days of a presumed apocalypse. On the other hand, *Zero* uses direct political references: its protagonist, who escapes from society then rebels against it as an 'environmentalist terrorist', targets real-life politicians, including, most likely, the current Hungarian prime minister.⁵ *Frozen May* alone might not imply a tendency of political commentary in post-apocalyptic fiction, but together with *Transmission* and *Zero* in cinema, and *Darker Outside* in literature, it might be interpreted as part of a trend in the genre. While *Transmission* and *Zero* do not set an exact time and place for their stories, *Frozen May* and *Darker Outside* use specific dates to connect the post-apocalyptic narratives to the socialist era.

It is also worth mentioning that there has been an earlier wave of Hungarian post-apocalyptic films, much closer to the change of the political system in 1989. The science-fiction stories of *Meteo* (Monory-Mész András 1990) and *Vasisten gyermekei/Children of the Iron Gods* (Tóth Tamás 1990) are played out in unspecified, but—based on the settings and environment—Eastern European societies that are one step closer to apocalypse: the destruction of the environment and the disintegration of the society go hand in hand. Thus the recent trend of post-apocalyptic films as political allegory finds its roots directly in post-apocalyptic Hungarian films that were released shortly after the system change.

Conclusion

In *Frozen May*, the experimental stylistic elements that infuse the narrative might place the film in the context of the nonhuman turn, although the story retains the possibility of a humanistic narrative. As part of the contemporary tendency of films about eco-apocalypse, *Frozen May* outlines a post-apocalyptic world dominated by nonhuman agents. Some of these agents are recognizable but indifferent to the decay of humanity (the trees), and some are unknown but ready to actively contribute to that decay by killing a survivor of the apocalypse, the protagonist of the film. I have discussed the structural and narrative dichotomies in Lichter's film: oppositions between human and nonhuman agents, genre (horror) filmmaking and experimental cinema, and a humanistic and nonhumanistic interpretation of the narrative. I have argued that these dichotomies are important because they signify the borderline position of Lichter's film and contribute to its ambition to reflect on the socialist past from the post-socialist present.

Frozen May positions its protagonist in an apocalyptic condition where nonhuman agents prevail, and the survivors of humanity no longer rule nature. However, the film also invites a humanistic interpretation due to the scenes concerning individual and cultural memory work. These flashback scenes and textual inserts of computer images are all connected to different technological media of the past, namely the 8 mm film negative and a pre-1990 personal computer.

Both Attila Veres's novel *Darker Outside* and *Frozen May* demonstrate that post-apocalyptic nonhuman fiction can be used as a narrative structure to articulate political

commentary. The film and the novel use markers (dates, clothing, pseudo-historical documents) to connect the post-apocalyptic stories to the socialist era of Hungary and, in general, Eastern Europe. Consequently, these works offer new visions of post-socialist Hungary; they show the country as an apocalyptic site, mostly empty of humans and the ideological concept of the 'humane'. Beside Lichter's work other post-apocalyptic films in recent Hungarian cinema also offer a social commentary to the post-apocalyptic narrative. Arguably, there is a tendency of contemporary Hungarian post-apocalyptic cinema that employs the concept of eco-apocalypse as a fictional background to political allegory and the description of a post-socialist condition. As a part of this group of films, *Frozen May* conjures an alternative landscape of post-socialist Hungary where the old concepts of identity and humanity have vanished.

Notes

1. Recently, an art exhibition proved that *Frozen May* is closely connected to the art world. *Futurum Perfectum* (2018) exhibited five works inspired by and centered around Lichter's film.
2. Latour's and Kohn's suggestions are similar to the imperative emphasized by the Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy in her emblematic poem *Trees*, originally published in 1967. Although Nemes Nagy was clearly unaware of concepts like the nonhuman turn, many of her poems describe nature as a living organism independent of human presence. According to most interpretations, witnessing the forces of nature in her lyricism is a path toward a transcendent, religious experience, which has no echo in *Frozen May*.
3. This parallel is also emphasized by the poster of the film, which mixes the X-ray image of a human brain with a landscape view of a forest.
4. By connecting the post-apocalyptic present to the socialist past, Lichter's film 're-politicises' the concept of the eco-apocalypse which is usually perceived as apolitical (Hammond and Ortega 2016, 4).
5. The director has stated in many interviews that the Hungarian National Film Fund wanted him to cut out the visible portrait of Viktor Orbán from the film, which he did not do, he scratched on the image with a pen instead (Holdsworth 2015).

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